

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

For The Five Year Update Of the

Draft Management Plan for the Coachella Valley Preserve System

BLM EA # CA-660-01-06

Prepared by the Center for Natural Lands Management

P.O. Box 188

Thousand Palms, CA 92276

(760) 343-1234

for

The USDI Bureau of Land Management

Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office

P.O. Box 1260

North Palm Springs, CA 92258

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I. Introduction

A. Background. The Coachella Valley Preserve System (CVPS) was established in 1986 as the result of a Habitat Conservation Plan (Section 10(a)(1)(b) of the Federal Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended) process to protect the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard, *Uma inornata*, a federally threatened, state endangered species. The Preserve System is owned and managed cooperatively by the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - National Wildlife Refuge, The California State Department of Fish and Game, California State Parks, The Nature Conservancy, and the Center for Natural Lands Management. Implementing Agreements signed by all partners active at the time of the agreements were prepared in 1986, 1990, and amended in 1999, and describe the roles of each partner. In 1986 an interim management plan was prepared by The Nature Conservancy as a initial guide to the priority management goals and approaches. In 1995 the Bureau of Land Management prepared the first CVPS management plan that received a full NEPA process and review. As it is now five years since that plan was prepared, an updated Management Plan and Decision Record has been prepared to reflect changing conditions, priorities, and new methodologies toward achieving the same primary goal of insuring that the fringe toed lizard population is protected in perpetuity.

B. Location. The CVPS consists of three separate preserve sites within the Coachella Valley of Riverside County, California. The three sites include: the Thousand Palms Preserve (often referred to as the Coachella Valley Preserve) that occurs north of Interstate 10, between the unincorporated communities of Thousand Palms and Bermuda Dunes, and straddles the Indio Hills; the Willow Hole Preserve (also called the Willow Hole - Edom Hill Preserve), and occurs north of Interstate 10 and Varner Road and east of Mountain View Avenue, and west and north of Edom Hill; and the Whitewater River Preserve (also called the Indian Avenue Preserve) occurring south of Interstate 10 and the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks, west of Gene Autry Trail, east of Indian Avenue, and north of Palm Springs.

C. Need for Proposed Action. In the five years since the last CVPS management plan was prepared, previous objectives have been met, new challenges and opportunities exist, and methodologies have changed with regard to the management of the CVPS. A management plan should be an adaptive document that reflects those changes and documents new priorities and approaches over time. Five years is an appropriate amount of time between updates of the management plan. A complete description of the current issues to be addressed are provided in the draft management plan for the Coachella Valley Preserve System which is hereby incorporated into this EA as an attachment.

D. Land Use Plan Conformance. In accordance with Section 202 of the Federal Land Policy Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), the BLM is mandated to develop land use plans with public input which designate and allocate use of the public lands. Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations Part 1610.5-3 requires that all subsequent management

actions conform to the land use plan.

In accordance with Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-3, the proposed action and alternatives are in conformance with the *California Desert Conservation Area Plan* (1980 as amended) which has designated the BLM parcels within the CVPS as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to be managed for the protection of endangered species habitat.

E. Relationship to Federal, State, and local law. The Coachella Valley Preserve System Management Plan is written under the authority of: the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 [43 United States Code (U.S.C.) 1701-1782, Public Law (P.L.) 98-540]; the ESA as amended [16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq., P.L. 93-205]; National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act [16 U.S.C. 668 dd]; Fish and Wildlife Improvement Act [16 U.S.C. 7429]; Sikes Act [P.L. 93-452/95-420]; the State of California Public Resources Code Div. 5, 5080.30, Chapter 5.2.

This plan complies with: the Coachella Valley Preserve System Memorandum of Understanding (as amended January 1991); the BLM-CDFG Master Memorandum of Understanding of June 1983; BLM-USFWS Memorandum of Understanding of December 1986; the BLM-TNC Memorandum of Understanding of March 1990; and Addendum No. 2 (1984) to the Master Memorandum of Understanding between BLM and CDFG which provides for comprehensive wildlife habitat management plans to be developed in cooperation with both agencies, under Title II of the Sikes Act.

This plan conforms with: the *California Desert Conservation Area Plan* (BLM, 1980, as amended); the California Desert District Fire management Activity Plan (BLM, 1994); CVFTL HCP (1986); the CVFTL Recovery Plan (USFWS 1985) and the following USFWS Biological Opinions: 1) Public Equestrian and Hiking Trail System within the Coachella Valley Preserve, Riverside Co., California (1-1-84-F-52); 2) Protective Fencing of Three Preserves in the Coachella Valley, Riverside Co., California (1-1-86-F-53); 3) Right-of-Way grant to the Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) (1-1-84-F-17); 4) Leasing of Land for Wind Energy Development (1-1-82-F-114) and 5) BLM initiated Wind Energy Development Biological Opinion (1-6-99-F-49).

Two amendments have been made to the CVFTL HCP. One, signed in 1999, transfers all duties, responsibilities, and authorities, previously held by TNC to CNLM. The other, signed the same year, allows the use of CVFTL HCP mitigation fees to acquire and manage lands within the designated sand source corridor to the Thousand Palms Preserve.

The proposed actions within the management plan are designed to protect and enhance habitat for the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard (*Uma inornata*) and other threatened and endangered species, such that adverse impacts are unlikely. Formal consultation per section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 as amended is not required. Informal consultation will be conducted with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game through the collaborative efforts of the CVPS management committee of which the USFWS and CVFG are participants.

Approval of this management plan will not result in surface disturbance, and is therefore exempt from Section 106 review in accordance with the State Protocol Agreement (1998) between the Bureau of Land Management and the State Historic Preservation Office. Mitigation measures have been incorporated into the plan specifying that cultural resource surveys and Section 106 consultation shall be conducted prior to any surface disturbing activities within the preserve. Artifacts are to remain in situ. The plan calls out for additional fencing around sensitive areas such as sand dunes to minimize intrusions, and to periodically survey for newly exposed cultural sites within sand dunes.

F. Current Conservation Planning Efforts. Early in the 1990's there was a growing recognition that the Coachella Valley Preserve System was insufficient to provide long term population viability for the floral and faunal elements of the Coachella Valley that are either endemic, near endemic, or have a significant portion of their population occurring within this valley. These species have the potential of receiving protective listing from either the State or Federal endangered species laws, and present a potential barrier to future development planning that would otherwise be consistent with the CVFTL HCP. In response to this risk, a multiple species HCP (MSHCP) planning effort is underway. This planning effort has identified the Coachella Valley Preserve System as a cornerstone for the MSHCP, and builds on that system to provide increased viability for the ecosystems the preserve system protects. All programs and strategies proposed in this plan are designed to be consistent with those proposed in the MSHCP.

II. Proposed Action and Alternatives

A. Proposed Action. The proposed action is the adoption of an updated version of the CVPS Management Plan signed and adopted in 1995. The proposed amendment does not supercede the 1995 plan, rather it is additive, reflecting changing conditions and needs for the efficient and effective management of the CVPS. For instance, public access issues and implementation mechanisms detailed in the 1995 plan have not changed since that plan was approved, and so they are not re-addressed in the proposed revision. The guidelines for public access set forth in the 1995 plan stand unchanged. Alternatively, threats to the integrity of the CVPS that were not recognized and/or addressed sufficiently in the 1995 plan, such as fragmentation, loss of sand sources, exotic weeds, sand stabilization, habitat loss, and better monitoring methodologies (not a threat, but a means of identifying threats), are dealt with in substantial detail in the proposed plan amendment.

In order to the reduce the risk of local extinction of fringe toed lizards on any of the three preserves, a host of management options are proposed which may be implemented within an adaptive management framework in collaboration with the management committee and based on monitoring results, for example:

Acquire lands within identified sand source corridors to insure uninterrupted sand flow into the habitat regions of the preserves.

Manage existing habitat to promote active sand movement by trucking/recycling sand that has exited the preserves, and experimentally destabilizing artificially stabilized aeolian habitats. Install sand fencing along southern - eastern margins of the preserves to retard sand loss.

Continue to remove tamarisk trees. Promote research into the impacts of exotic mustard and grasses, and explore control measures if impacts are significant.

Continue to control off-road vehicles from preserve areas.

Control feral animals from preserve areas

Maintain open water habitat for endangered pupfish in Thousand Palms Canyon.

Maintain existing corridors to larger blocks of public land to maintain genetic interchange of wildlife populations, maintain healthy predator populations, protect aquifers from over drafting and drying up protected wetlands, and protect sand movement process. Use acquisition to achieve this objective when necessary.

Continue to provide the public with passive recreation opportunities and to inform them of the inherent value the CVPS offers the Coachella Valley.

Implement a more comprehensive monitoring plan to track the health of the protected populations and their habitats, as well as the relative influence of threats to that “health”.

B. No Action Alternative - The Proposed Action would not be undertaken. Existing management and use of the site would continue subject to applicable statutes, regulations, policy and land use plans.

III. Affected Environment

A. Area Description. The Coachella Valley Preserve System consists of dune fields surrounded by creosote bush and saltbush dune hummock areas, shaped by periodic storm events and aeolian transport of sand. The dunes and dune hummocks provide habitat for the federally listed Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard. Palm Oases are also protected within the Preserve System. A detailed description of the preserve system site characteristics is provided in the attached draft management plan.

B. Land Status

1. **Land Use Classification.** The BLM- managed public lands within the preserve system are classified as Class L-Limited lands and designated Areas of Critical Environmental Concern.

2. **Valid Existing Rights.** Utility corridors exist within the Coachella Valley Preserve north and south of Ramon Road. An existing communication site is located at the far east end of the CVP. An existing right-of-way grant for wind turbines exists at the Willow Hole-Edom Hill Preserve.

IV. Environmental Consequences

A. Summary of Impacts. The following table summarizes potential impacts to various elements of the human environment, including the "critical elements" listed in BLM Manual H-1790-1, Appendix 5, as amended. Elements for which there are no impacts will not be discussed further in this document.

Environmental Element	Proposed Action	No Action Alternative
Air Quality	Minimal impact	Minimal impact
ACECs	may beneficially impact	may beneficially impact
Cultural Resources	no impact	no impact
Native American Concerns	no impact	no impact
Farmlands	no issues/ no impact	no issues/ no impact
Floodplains	no issues/ no impact	no issues/ no impact
Minerals	no issues/ no impact	no issues/ no impact
T&E Animal Species	may beneficially impact	may beneficially impact
T&E Plant Species	may beneficially impact	may beneficially impact
Invasive, Nonnative Species	may beneficially impact	may beneficially impact
Wastes (hazardous/solid)	no issues/ no impact	no issues/ no impact
Water Quality (surface and ground)	may beneficially impact	may beneficially impact
Wetlands/Riparian Zones	may beneficially impact	may beneficially impact
Wild and Scenic Rivers	no issues/ no impact	no issues/ no impact
Wilderness	no issues/ no impact	no issues/ no impact
Environmental Justice	no issues/ no impact	no issues/ no impact
Visual Resource Mgmt.	maintain visual scenery	no impact

B. Discussion of Impacts.

1. Proposed Action.

Air Quality. Dust and sand blow off the preserve into non-preserve developed areas during severe wind events. This is a natural process and so is not subject to Federal and State PM-10 Air Quality standards, controls, and mitigation. Nevertheless, non action results in considerable hardship to down-wind residents. The proposed management plan calls for the placement of “sand fencing” along the downwind margins of both the Thousand Palms and Whitewater River Preserves. This action will retard, but not stop, sand and dust movement off the preserves. It will reduce the magnitude of hardship to downwind residents and will create habitat for the targeted species the CVPS was created to protect.

ACECs: The BLM lands within the CVPS are designated as ACECs. The proposed action will result in more efficient management applied to those lands. Conversely, no action will result no approved management actions in response to issues and threats identified in the proposed management plan.

Cultural Resources: The proposed plan addresses cultural resources in the same manner that the existing plan does. No disturbance of cultural artifacts or areas will be allowed except under the supervision and authority of the land owner agency, and following guidelines established for State and Federal lands.

Wildlife and Plants: The plan would continue and expand the protection of native plants and wildlife within the Preserve system. This protection would include the wide array of species described in the 1995 plan, including the following listed species: Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard, desert tortoise, least Bell’s vireo, Coachella Valley Milkvetch and the desert pupfish. The following beneficial impacts would be expected if this plan is implemented:

- 1) Lands to the west of the Coachella Valley Preserve would be acquired, increasing the amount of habitat protected for blowsand dependent species and helping to ensure the flow of blowsand onto the existing Preserve.
- 2) The removal of tamarisk would benefit the native plants and animals of the Preserve by permitting the free movement of sand, eliminating competition with exotic plants and preventing groundwater depletion.
- 3) The fencing and signing of all fringe-toed lizard habitat within the Preserve would reduce mortality of blowsand species and their habitat. Law enforcement would also reduce these adverse impacts.
- 4) Removal of feral pets would reduce mortality of native species such as lizards, snakes and birds.

- 5) Removal of bullfrogs could reduce pupfish mortality and mortality of other native aquatic species. Thinning of aquatic vegetation would also maintain pupfish habitat.
- 6) The acquisition of corridors between the Preserves and other protected areas would ensure that adequate gene flow between populations occurs. Such genetic diversity would ensure that populations on the preserves can adapt to future environmental stresses.
- 7) Increased public outreach should build support for the Preserves and ensure their long-term survival.
- 8) The monitoring would identify and track potential threats to native species, enabling managers to respond with appropriate management actions to mitigate those threats. The monitoring program is in keeping with an adaptive management approach, where cause and effect relationships are identified and success of management efforts evaluated and modified as needed.

Valid Existing Rights. The actions outlined in this draft management plan do not apply to private lands within the ACEC boundary. Valid existing rights on private or public lands will not be affected.

2. No Action Alternative. Under this alternative, the impacts described above would occur to a smaller degree. Additionally, not updating the existing management plan would leave the Preserve managers without guidelines that reflect current needs, and require them to seek NEPA review for each new management proposal separately, an inefficient and time consuming process. In that scenario, each new proposal would not necessarily have a review in context with other existing and proposed management actions, again creating an inefficient and ineffective process.

C. Cumulative Impact Assessment. If all components of the revised plan are successfully implemented, the overall risk of extinction of listed species on the Preserve System (fringe-toed lizard, desert tortoise, desert pupfish, least Bell's vireo and milkvetch) would be reduced substantially. If, any aspect is not implemented, then the risk of extinction would be greater. The risk of harmful impacts to other rare species, such as the flat-tailed horned lizard, would also remain.

Other factors beyond the scope of this plan, primarily urban development, threaten the Preserve System's biological resources. The proposed developments to the north of the Preserve would adversely impact the Preserve by impairing the deposition of fine sands down Thousand Palms Canyon and decreasing groundwater. Continued development to the west of the Coachella Valley Preserve threatens the movement of blowsand into the Preserve from that direction.

The Indian Avenue Preserve and the Willow Hole Preserve are relatively small and isolated. If lands around them are developed in the future the viability of these lands for the target species would be compromised. Currently, lands to the east and south of the Indian Avenue Preserve are likely to be developed, as are those to the north, west and south of Willow Hole. Such developments would reduce the effective habitat size of these areas, as adjacent lands are converted to residential housing. New land acquisitions under the Multiple Species Plan could enlarge these Preserves and prevent these effects.

V. Public Participation and Agency Coordination

A. Public Participation

Public participation is an important and integral part of planning. In addition to the standard 30-day public review and comment period for this draft plan and environmental assessment, members of the public are invited to attend the quarterly Coachella Valley Preserve System Management Committee meetings or volunteer at the Coachella Valley Preserve. Please contact Ms. Elena Misqueu of the BLM at (760) 251-4800 for additional information.

B. Persons and Agencies Consulted

Members of the Coachella Valley Preserve Management Committee, representing the following agencies: BLM, US Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Game, California Department of Parks and Recreation-Salton Sea, The Nature Conservancy and the Center for Natural Lands Management

C. Prepared by:

Cameron Barrows, Regional Director - Center for Natural Lands Management
Gavin Wright, Wildlife Biologist - BLM
Wanda Raschkow, Cultural Resource Specialist - BLM

D. Reviewed by:

Elena Misqueu
Environmental Coordinator

11-21-00
Date

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:

Environmental impacts associated with the proposed Management Plan for the Coachella Valley Preserve System have been assessed. Based on the analysis provided in the attached EA, I conclude the approved action is not a major federal action and will result in no significant impacts to the environment under the criteria in Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations 1508.18 and 1508.27. Preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement to further analyze possible impacts is not required pursuant to Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969.

Issued by: James G. Kenna* 11-29-00
Field Manager Date

* Original signature on file at the BLM Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office